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Arming a Region

Central America Grows Ever More Militarized As Superpowers Vie

Nicaragua Gets Soviet Tanks And Rocket Launchers; U.S. Bolsters Honduras

Tales of a Sandinist Defector

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Miguel Bolanos Hunter, a young, rail-thin Nicaraguan intelligence officer, defected to the U.S. recently and told the Reagan administration a disquieting story.

Mr. Bolanos claimed that 1,500 to 2,000 of a reported 4,500 Cuban teachers in Nicaragua actually are Cuban soldiers. They live in a Managua apartment complex with sophisticated communications gear and two apartments full of boxes of Soviet-made AK-47 rifles, he asserted.

"They were real troops," Mr. Bolanos says. "They weren't advisers. They were mixed in with the army, with the police."

Nicaraguan officials deny that Cuban teachers do anything but teach, and they dismiss the 24-year-old Mr. Bolanos as merely a mid-level official who is talking about subjects he didn't deal with. Nevertheless, the Reagan administration regards his story as another disturbing sign of the military buildup in leftist-ruled Nicaragua.

The Reagan administration's obsession with Central America springs directly from the Nicaraguan military expansion and the threat officials think it poses to pro-U.S. states all around. This Nicaraguan program, the administration maintains, can be traced directly to Cuba and the Soviet Union.

U.S. Involvement

In fact, there is a steady military buildup throughout Central America, and the U.S. is contributing as well as the Soviet Union and Cuba. Military muscle in the region still doesn't come close to matching that in a place like the Middle East, but some analysts fear the region eventually could become a similar arsenal fed by the superpowers.

Already Nicaragua has some of the same kinds of basic weapons the Soviets provide to allies like Syria. Meanwhile, in neighboring Honduras, U.S. military uniforms are sprouting, and the Pentagon has started a virtual air-cargo service to shuttle in equipment and supplies.

For most Americans, it is perplexing to try to sort out just how big and meaningful the military buildup is on all sides. The job is difficult because the Reagan administration stresses—and, critics say, overstates—the Soviet and Cuban activities while playing down its own moves.

Risks for Region

But understanding the buildup is essential to understanding policies in the region and the current crisis atmosphere. Few U.S. officials think Nicaragua wants to openly invade any of its neighbors. They do worry, though, that it is creating a military machine strong enough that the Sandinistas will be able to foster leftist uprisings elsewhere in Central America without fear of retaliation from neighboring governments.

The Reagan administration, as it says repeatedly, believes Nicaragua already is actively supporting leftist insurgents in nearby El Salvador. Administration planners worry that allied governments in Honduras, Costa Rica and Guatemala also could be subverted eventually, leaving Mexico threatened by a broad-based insurrection to the south.

For their part, Nicaraguans say their military strength is needed simply because

the most powerful nation on earth—the U.S.—is supporting groups bent on overthrowing the Sandinista government.

Right now, a recent series of intelligence reports has U.S. officials worried that Cuba and the Soviet Union might step up their military aid to Nicaragua. One report showed Cuban troops practicing unusual amphibious landings, while another said five Nicaraguans have started getting aircraft training inside the Soviet Union. Other intelligence reports assert that more Cuban advisers have arrived and that more Soviet ships are on the way; administration officials assume they carry some military equipment.

An Overreaction?

The reports helped prompt the big U.S.-led military maneuvers now under way near Nicaragua. But critics, including some inside the administration, think the White House gets carried away when it responds to such hints. "There is a sense up here the administration has overreacted and undercut our friends' efforts to find a peaceful way out," says Rep. Michael Barnes of Maryland, the chairman of the House Latin American subcommittee. Some foreign diplomats say their soundings show that a wary Cuba actually would like to scale back its exposure in Nicaragua, while the Soviets never have been overly enthusiastic about getting heavily involved.

Though there is heated dispute about the precise size and meaning of current military moves, there is general agreement that Nicaragua is building a large and well-armed army by Central American standards. When the Sandinistas came to power in 1979, they defeated a national guard of 15,000. By U.S. estimates, which are generally in line with independent estimates, the Sandinistas since have built an army of 25,000, a reserve of 25,000 and a civilian militia of 80,000. That means Nicaragua, a country of 2.8 million, conceivably could put 130,000 people into uniform.

The Nicaraguan force clearly is big for the region. El Salvador has about 25,000 in its army, national guard and security forces. Honduras, which the U.S. is trying to make the linchpin of pro-U.S. defenses, has about 15,000 in its army and civil guard. Guatemala has about 19,000 in its armed forces and another 11,600 in the national police and treasury police. Costa Rica doesn't have an army at all.

From the beginning, the Sandinistas have turned to Cuba and the Soviet Union for at least some military help. Mr. Bolanos, the defector, says that a few weeks after the revolution he was dispatched to the Managua airport to pick up five Soviet generals who had arrived to advise the chief of staff.

The shipments of heavy equipment that most worry the U.S. began arriving later, about three years ago. And in recent weeks, U.S. officials claim, the shipments have picked up.

Ten large cargo ships have docked at Nicaraguan ports so far this year, Pentagon officials say, each carrying some military cargo along with other goods; that is as many ships as arrived in all of 1982, the officials maintain. Over half of this year's arrivals are Soviet ships, and Soviet vessels also are among nine or 10 others the U.S. says are still steaming toward Nicaragua.

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